

Nausicaa, authoress of the Odyssey

Otis Wilde

2002 will be remembered as a significant year for many reasons, but classicists may want to mark it as the centenary of the death of an extraordinary maverick, Samuel Butler. His output was amazingly diverse: he was a painter and an early pioneer in the youthful art of photography; he wrote the best-selling novel *Erewhon* (as well as several others, less successful in commercial terms); his theoretical writings confronted the two most powerful adversaries of the day, Christianity (though his father was a reverend, he turned his back on the church) and scientific Darwinism. But what preoccupied him most in the last decade of his life was Homer. And, in particular, his bizarre theory that, while the *Iliad* was composed by a man called Homer, the *Odyssey* was composed by a young Sicilian girl who appears in the text as Nausicaa.

Butler's book *The authoress of the Odyssey* was published in 1897, to widespread embarrassment and confusion. Was this a joke? A cock snooked at the male-dominated, Oxbridge-educated classical establishment, with its stern and macho visions of Homer? We can only guess; certainly, Butler never suggested (publicly, at any rate) that he was anything other than deadly serious. But then to 'confess' it was a joke would have been to play into the hands of those who wanted to dismiss his theories; whereas leaving his readers with uncomfortable uncertainty made for a much more disturbing book. In this brief article, I want to try taking Butler seriously. Or, at least, to explore the possibility that Nausicaa is a figure who plays an exceptional role in the *Odyssey*.

Book six of the poem. The naked, exhausted, brine-encrusted, wrack-strewn Odysseus sees the young princess Nausicaa washing clothes and playing ball with her servants on the beach. Odysseus' fears at this stage are understandable. The last time he met a young girl out for a wander, she turned out to be the daughter of the king of the fearsome Laestrygonians, who attacked his ships and destroyed all but one of them. 'Are they violent, savage and lacking in justice,' he wonders, 'or hospitable to strangers and reverent of mind?' Hopelessly lost in (so he thinks) an indeterminate world of endless wandering, Odysseus has learned to mistrust any of the conventional signs of civilisation. But what else can he do? He steps out and confronts the girls. The servants scatter, but Athene puts courage in Nausicaa's heart.

For the reader, though, any sense of threat to Odysseus' safety has long since been defused. Almost all of Odysseus' fantastic adventures (except for the thoughts and movements of gods) are presented through Odysseus' eyes, so that we know only what he knows; but in this case, the narrator has made an exception, carefully describing Nausicaa in advance, and how Athene out of goodwill for Odysseus primed her for her trip to the beach. Unlike Odysseus, the audience know full well that Nausicaa is no threat; and that her parents, so far from being savage Laestrygonians, are good, cultured people. Odysseus' arrival on Scheria is the beginning of his transition back to the normal, civilised world.

So we know that Nausicaa will not harm Odysseus. But do we know that Odysseus will not harm Nausicaa? When he emerges from his hiding-places, the narrator's words are highly suggestive:

*Godlike Odysseus emerged from under the thicket.
From the thick foliage with his broad hand he broke off
a leafy branch to cover his flesh and hide his genitals.
Trusting in his strength, he advanced,
like a mountain-nurtured lion,
who proceeds, though he is assailed by rain and wind,
and his eyes
flash. He pursues cattle or sheep, or wild deer. His
belly commands him
to make an attempt upon the sheep, or to enter a
well-built house.*

Though the actions described here belong to Odysseus, the visualisation is presented through the eyes of Nausicaa and the servants. He emerges from his hiding; he hides his 'male parts'. It is the girls whose gaze we share as we read these lines, envisaging the tableau that confronts them, a complex combination of bodily revelation and concealment. But this raises worrying questions about the following lines, the simile. Is it the narrator, from his external perspective, who compares Odysseus to a lion? Or is this what the girls are thinking? The lion is a powerful figure, *Trusting in his strength* – which tells us where the power lies from *this* particular vantage. More important still are the lion's intentions in the simile: he is a hunter, pursuing cattle or sheep or deer. The girls risk becoming prey to this terrifying lion, looking to satisfy his belly with their flesh.

The simplest way of reading these lines is as though they reflect the girls' fearful thoughts. But there is no absolute guidance on the matter, and that leaves us with a degree of uncertainty. And, indeed, this question of interpretation raises big questions about our understanding of Odysseus. If the simile is presented from the partial, limited perspective of the girls, then his virtue is safe: we can continue to consider him as an honourable figure, albeit one whose intentions can be misunderstood. If, though, the simile represents the words of the authoritative, all-knowing narrator, then Odysseus becomes a more problematic figure – one who can entertain disturbing thoughts of rape. When he emerges from the bushes, what are his intentions? Can we be sure? How well do we think we know him?

The narrator, moreover, continues to hint at a sexually aggressive role for Odysseus. Here are the lines immediately after the simile:

*So Odysseus prepared to mingle with the young girls of the
well-ordered hair, naked though he was, for necessity
came upon him.
He appeared terrible to them, besmirched with sea-salt,
and they scattered this way and that onto the
promontories at the shore.
The daughter of Alcinous [i.e. Nausicaa] alone
remained, for Athena
put courage into her heart, and took the fear from her limbs,
and she stood and faced him. Odysseus pondered
whether to beg the beautiful girl by clasping
her knees, or to stand off as he was and beg her with
sweet words
to show him the city, and give him clothes.*

At the beginning of this passage, the narrator shifts the focus onto Odysseus and his intentions. He intends to act, so we are told, 'in this way' – that is to say, like the lion. A disturbing prospect. Perhaps, then, the simile was presented from the viewpoint of Odysseus? Maybe it was he who was imagining himself as a voracious lion, ready to pounce? This interpretation is underlined by the use of the word 'mingle' (he *prepared to mingle with the girls* ...). The Greek word can simply suggest social interaction, but it can also mean 'have sex with' – and given the strong hints we have seen so far, this meaning must also be activated here.

The situation is quickly clarified. Odysseus ceases to be comparable to a mountain lion; the narrator reveals his inner dilemma, whether to supplicate Nausicaa or to beg her for help, both proper, orderly, respectful ways of behaving towards a young lady. (One could question what Nausicaa's feelings would be if a naked man clasped her knees, but that may be a different story.) And perhaps that is the end of it. So why, then, has Homer gone to so much effort to present the episode from Nausicaa's perspective, and suggest the threat that Odysseus may pose to her?

Butler's theory about the authorship of the *Odyssey* is deliberately outrageous, but it does pick up on a genuine feature of the text. There number of possible explanations, without resorting to the hardline view that Nausicaa was the 'real author'. Firstly, to surround the encounter with an atmosphere of sexual tension, tension which will be released by his artful and civilised speech. Only if we are led to experience something of the terror of the young girls can we appreciate the relief. Secondly, to show us Odysseus' ambiguous situation, poised precariously between the wilderness from which he is emerging and the civilised world to which he is returning. His uncertain position, between these two states, is expressed in the sense of uncertainty as to how he will deal with the young maiden.

The third explanation is perhaps the most provocative, but nonetheless important for that. For the target audience of the *Odyssey* – men, no doubt – the encounter with Nausicaa presents a moment of sexual fantasy, of imagining the possibilities of sexual rapacity outside the constraints of normal society. That fantasy is swiftly tamed, as Odysseus's speech invests the situation with the trappings of normal, civilised conduct: the moment of fantastic indulgence is allowed to pass harmlessly, without threat to civilised values. If this interpretation is right, it may explain why the Nausicaa episode proved so attractive ('charming' was the usual euphemism) to generations of Victorian men, including Butler, well attuned as they were to pornographic discretion.

Otis Wilde was until recently a Fellow of Samuel Butler's old college. He has since been banished to the west country and only allowed back on the odd omnibus trip.

You can find more on Samuel Butler at
<http://65.107.211.206/victorian/science/butler.html>
<http://blackmask.com/books13c/sambt.htm>